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Jennifer Nettles Band: "What You Signed Up For"

It was August of last year. Austin guitarist Monte Montgomery was celebrating his birthday as well as the release of a new album, and he was playing one of his highest-profile gigs to date at the legendary Antone's. My brother and I, always interested in getting turned on to new music, got there early to hear the warm-up band - a charismatic singer from Atlanta who would be trading warm-up and headline rights with Monte while touring in each other's territory.

It didn't take long before I realized that she had more than charisma going for her. It was two weeks and at least 20 cycles before the album finally made it out of my CD player. And I would never stop eagerly anticipating her next visit to Austin. I've found in the Jennifer Nettles Band an artist who offers more to the music scene than anyone since the Beatles.

Knowing that she grew up in Atlanta, it's not surprising that Jennifer Nettles grew up on the four basic food groups of the Southeast: rock, blues, folk, and soul. She began singing at the age of seven, and her professional career started in 1996, in the closing years of college, with Soul Miner's Daughter (SMD), a much more acoustic-pop oriented band led by herself and singer-guitarist Cory Jones. SMD recorded two albums, *Hallelujah* and *Sacred & Profane*, which sold over 20,000 copies independently.

But after spending over a year being unhappy with the band's direction, in September of 1999 Nettles announced her decision to leave. As the band's cornerstone, SMD fell apart almost immediately, so Nettles reenlisted the same members (minus Cory Jones) and proceeded to make a new album that featured four or five songs from the SMD years (rearranged), as well as a whole host of new and exciting material. Her new sound eliminated all sensibilities of "pop" that had gone along with SMD, and instead forged a completely new brand of music that simply combined and alternated her influences, from the Nine Inch Nails-plays-thrash metal of "Listen" to the straight jazz of the very next track, "At Stake."

And with her second album, *Gravity: Drag Me Down*, she's done it again. Consider: track four, "Change" features a jazz intro, a Motown chorus, a funk verse, and a gospel close. Track five, "El Camino," is about as hillbilly, honky-tonk, sugar-footin' country as you can possibly get. Track six, "Shift," is death metal meets Ani diFranco. That's seven genres in three songs.

That's talent. Do yourself a favor and check out her website. Listen to a few songs. Go to a concert next time she's playing anywhere near you. Because the one song you saw on the DVD doesn't even come close to doing her justice. Jennifer Nettles is the best thing to happen to music in a long time, and I, for one, am looking forward to being able to say, "I was a fan before she was famous."

PostScript: In 2004 Nettles and two other songwriters from the Southeast formed a country-music side project called Sugarland, which has been winning Grammys and CMA Awards and reaching multi-platinum sales levels. Like I said - I was a fan before she was famous.